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Women and Public Policy in Afghanistan: A Comment

WILLIAM MALEY*
The University of New South Wales, Canberra, Australia

Summary. — Policies to assist Afghan women are an important subject for discussion. An article in *World Development* (Moghadam, Valentine, M., "Building human resources and women's capabilities in Afghanistan: A retrospect and prospects," *World Development,* Vol. 22, No. 6 (1994), pp. 859–875) addresses this subject, but gives an inadequate account of the historical context within which policies must be devised. Memories of the terroristic means used by communist regimes during 1978–92 to impose "reforms" upon an unreceptive society remain a significant barrier to the expansion of women's opportunities. It is counterproductive to abuse or threaten the new Afghan rulers: a carefully executed process of consultation with established powerholders is required if enlightened policies for Afghan women are to be implemented.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the collapse of the Afghan communist regime in April 1992, the position of women in Afghanistan is increasingly and appropriately a topic which demands detailed attention. While a number of valuable studies have examined the social dynamics of gender relations in different parts of the country (for example Doubleday, 1988; Tapper, 1991), the evaluation by scholars of various policies which might be adopted by the state, international organizations, or nongovernment organizations (NGOs) in response to the concerns of diverse circles of Afghan women is at a rudimentary stage. The appearance in this journal of an article addressing these issues (Moghadam, 1994) is therefore welcome. While Moghadam's conclusions are cautious, however, a number of the assertions which she makes while working her way toward them are not, and the cumulative effect of these assertions is to leave the casual reader with a distorted impression of the historical context within which the formulation of policies to deal with the concerns of Afghan women must take place. In addition, Moghadam's discussion omits a number of crucial details about recent Afghan history. The aim of the following remarks is to rectify some of these defects.

2. POLICY PRIOR TO THE DECEMBER 1979 SOVIET INVASION

Moghadam asserts that women "in cities such as Herat, Kabul, Jalalabad, Mazar-eSharif . . . wear the *burqa*, a full-length veil with a crocheted window for the eyes" (Moghadam, 1994, p. 863). The exact time to which she is referring is unclear: while she uses the present tense, these words appear in a section of her article entitled "The Socioeconomic Situation before 1979." Applied to the period before 1959, this comment would generally have held true, but in August of that year, the monarchical regime of Zahir Shah inaugurated the practice of women appearing unveiled in public (see Dupree, 1973, pp. 530–533). Attempts by conservative mullahs to protest the new policy were put down, and from that point onward, women in Kabul increasingly abandoned the *burqa*, although some of course continued to wear it as a matter of choice. It was as a result of this move that "education and employment became available" (Moghadam, 1994, p. 863) on an increasing scale for urban women. It is important to emphasize this point, for Moghadam has a regrettable tendency to give all the credit for positive changes in the life chances of Afghan women to the Marxist "People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan" (PDPA), formed in January 1965 (Arnold, 1983), and its offshoot the "Democratic Organization of Afghan Women" (DOAW). For example, she asserts that "As a result of DOAW and PDPA activities, women won the right to vote." This is simply wrong: Afghan women received the right to vote pursuant to Articles 25 and 43 of the Constitution of 1 October 1964 (Dupree, 1991, pp. 55–56).

The willingness to sanction votes for women shown by a majority of the largely male delegates at the 1964 *Loya Jirgah* (Great Assembly) which adopted the new constitution also points to a weakness in Moghadam's interpretation of the resistance to the

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policies of the PDPA regime which came to office following a bloody coup in April 1978. She argues that "the DOAW encountered hostility from mullahs and other conservative elements" because of the decision "not to allow literacy to remain a matter of (men's) choice, but rather a matter of principle and law" (Moghadam, 1994, p. 864). There is much more to this story. According to Nancy Dupree, "in practice the literacy classes were merely political meetings in disguise" and cadres from the party's women's organization "used heavy-handed tactics to harass illiterate women — a politically vulnerable group" (Dupree, 1984, p. 321). Centlivres-Demont makes the further point that it was "neither knowledge nor literacy that was rejected . . . it was the content of the courses and methods of application that caused reaction and resistance." More seriously, the

> negative effects of the campaign were felt for a long time within the refugee population; among the traditional elements it bred doubt and rejection of all teaching imposed by the government, and it caused considerable damage to the project of literacy for girls (Centlivres-Demont, 1994, 345–346).

An understanding of this legacy of suspicion is crucial to identifying effective ways of advancing the aspirations of Afghan women in the post-communist era.

3. AFTER THE INVASION

The regime which came to power in the 1978 coup rapidly resorted to terror as a means of revolutionary transformation (Saikal and Maley, 1991). "Women," Nancy Dupree has observed, "shared more than equally in these events; often only women with their children occupied the mud-brick housing flattened by air and ground fire" (Dupree, 1992, p. 31). With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the situation for Afghan women became even worse.

Moghadam's account of events in the years following the invasion is remarkable. She quotes official statistics which paint a picture of quiet achievement in the areas of women's literacy and occupational mobility, but makes no apparent effort to explore the reliability of the figures which she quotes. To employ data, even from UN publications, which suggest that the population growth rate was higher around 1985 — in the middle of a massively destructive war — than in the relatively serene year of 1975 (cf. Moghadam, 1994, pp. 862, 868) is an act of great daring. Her analysis of the regime's policies is also less than compelling. Discussing the regime's approach to education, she asserts that "the reason for the dispatch of students to the Soviet Union" was that education had become "even more precarious," but fails to note reports that children were forcibly dispatched, in ways which traumatized their mothers (Laber, 1986, p. 3). She further records as one of the regime's achievements that there "were female employees (and several female volunteer soldiers) at Pol-e Charkhi prison" (Moghadam, 1994, p. 866). In light of the tortures which were routinely carried out in the regime's prisons (Rahimi, 1986, p. 108), this is akin to praising Himmler as an equal opportunity employer because there were women guards at Belsen.

Moghadam records that about "300,000 people have been maimed, and more than one million people are estimated to have lost their lives" (Moghadam, 1994, p. 865) but argues that the communist regime was "supportive of the objectives of reconstruction, national development, peace, and the advancement of women" (Moghadam, 1994, p. 871). If this was the case, the advancement of women took rather strange forms, and "peace" must have had a decidedly dialectical meaning.

Using techniques of hospitality and propaganda familiar from other Soviet-type systems (Hollander, 1981; Hollander, 1983, pp. 268–273), the PDPA regime assured foreign visitors that it was interested only in peace and progress. But the reality of its actions was quite different. In early 1980, regime troops fired on a peaceful demonstration by schoolgirls protesting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, killing a number of them including the leader of the protest, Nahid (see Gille, 1980, Kakar, 1995, pp. 120–121). Women in rural areas frequently were victims of atrocities by the regime's forces (Dupaigne, 1985; Barry, Lagerfelt and Terrenoire, 1986; Laber and Rubin, 1988; Maley, 1991). Such atrocities attracted not the faintest word of public protest from official women's groups, confirming their status as mere mouthpieces of their male party superiors. While Moghadam notes that the male death rate exceeded the female (Moghadam, 1994, p. 865), she fails to note that according to the most detailed study of causes of unnatural deaths during the Afghan war, 76.7% of female deaths resulted from aerial bombings — that is, from the use of weapons to which only the regime and its Soviet allies had access (Sliwinski, 1989, p. 43). Even after the signing in April 1988 of the Geneva Accords on Afghanistan which provided for the withdrawal of Soviet forces, fierce attacks on the countryside continued: the number of SCUD missile launches between the signing of the Accords and the collapse of the communist regime exceeded the total of "all ballistic missiles fired in anger since the end of the Second World War" (Bermudez, 1992, p. 51), with large numbers of civilian victims. Finally, the communist regime left a country littered with an estimated 10 million anti-personnel mines, once again weapons from which women and children remain at risk long after active hostilities have ceased (Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights, 1993, p. 145).

In the light of this and a great deal of graphic further information, readily available, on the behavior of the communist regime toward the civilian population, it is not clear on what basis one could describe the regime as "supportive" — in any meaningful sense — of the objectives of "peace" and "the advancement of women."

4. THE SITUATION IN PAKISTAN

Moghadam is critical of the performance of UNHCR and NGOs in refugee camps in Pakistan, and cites figures which point to a considerable discrepancy between the educational services available for boys and those for girls. She appears to blame this in part on "simplistic and frequently uninformed notions of cultural specificity" (Moghadam, 1994, p. 860). She does not, however, give any attention to the particular difficulties posed by the fact that both Afghan refugees and NGOs were working in the middle of one of the most conservative parts of a foreign country, namely the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. If Afghan refugees were wary of female literacy projects because of their bitter experience in 1978, still more so were conservative circles in Pakistan, whose sensitivities the refugees and those supporting them had little option but to recognize (see also Weinbaum, 1994, p. 67).

Despite all this, programs such as the women's craft program of the Save the Children Federation (USA) have shown that achievement in the area of female education and training is possible, as long as it is an area approached without the patronizing insensitivity that can result from what Tapper has labeled "a First World ideology of production and gender roles" (Tapper, 1984, p. 305). The SCF program, in which traditional leaderships were treated as partners rather than as likely enemies, points to the direction which policies to assist Afghan women should take, especially in the large areas of Afghanistan — at least two-thirds, according to a recent UN mission — which are now at peace (United Nations, 1994, paragraph 13).

Furthermore, while the Afghan Islamic movement contains deeply reactionary groups — such as the *Hezb-i Islami* of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an "Islamo-Leninist" party (Roy, 1994, p. 113) which has been savagely rocketing Kabul for more than two years — it also includes elements which in principle endorse the expansion of educational opportunities for women. The *Jamiat-i Islami* of Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, President of Afghanistan from mid-1992, supported a girls' high school in Peshawar headed successively by Tajwar Kakar and Najiba Mansouri, and while the school was fiercely opposed by some extremists (see Mayotte, 1992; Centlivres-Demont, 1994), its most persistent difficulty was obtaining regular funding for its operations, a problem shared by boys' schools.

5. CONCLUSION

Postcommunist Afghanistan faces deep problems, of which the position of women is only one (Maley, 1993; Maley, 1994). Nonetheless, there is no doubt that Afghan women are a powerful resource for post-war reconstruction and development, and the conclusion that a strategy of "building support for girls' education in the community and within households" is essential (Moghadam, 1994, p. 873) is one with which most informed observers would agree. The means by which this strategy is to be pursued are, however, all-important. It is vital to recognize that such support cannot be built by coercion, by threats, or by denigrating those in a position of social authority. Given the events since the communist coup, Afghan male leaderships value their autonomy more than ever before, and will turn their backs on any policies that they see as attempts to compromise it. This does not mean that women are beyond the reach of enlightened policies, but it does mean that only following the most carefully executed process of consultation with established powerholders do such policies for Afghan women have any prospect of being implemented.

One need not be a supporter of male power in Afghan society in order to grasp that the communist experiment was a disaster for ordinary Afghan women (Goodwin, 1994). Afghanistan's Marxist women activists, acting in concert with their male party counterparts, succeeded in ruining the lives of a vast number of the women in whose interests they purported to act. In the words of Centlivres-Demont, the communist regime's policy toward women was "fouled at the core by the very nature of those who created it" (Centlivres-Demont, 1994, p. 363). This is a conclusion which all those who proffer advice on women and public policy in Afghanistan would do well to ponder.

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